Reformations

The Reformations of the 1530s and thereafter were the most significant extrinsic shock experienced by English society between the Black Death and the Civil Wars of the 1640s. The magnitude of the shock has never been in doubt. What is now clear, however, is the extent to which it was genuinely extrinsic. England's religious life until the late 1520s was remarkably stable. There were, naturally, fault lines and points of stress, and when the earthquake came, they marked some of the points at which the old structure fractured. Yet they did not cause it. This crisis came on England unawares, and it came in two distinct forms: a political and an intellectual assault, often but not always in alliance with each other. Between them, they remade English society. This chapter will sketch out the landscape that they struck before discussing some of the ways they changed it, and how the English responded to, adapted to and resisted the new world in which they found themselves.

Pre-Reformation English religion has been a playground for modern prejudices, too easily depicted either as a swamp of superstition and corruption or as a timeless, bucolic paradise of community and simple faith. We do not need to accept either caricature to recognise that, in its own terms, it was working fairly well. By European standards, the English Church was unusually well-disciplined and well-led. It was able to provide sacramental, pastoral and practical services to its people which were generally adequate, even if they fell far short of the Church's own sometimes wildly unrealistic ideals. There were plenty of frictions over predictable matters of land, money and law, but none of this seems to have coalesced into the sort of more widespread anticlerical prejudice which was common in contemporary Germany, Scotland or elsewhere. Instead, the Church drew on – and replenished – a deep well of legitimacy and affection. The signs of this cycle of loyalty can be seen in the consistent support for all manner of local ecclesiastical services provided by both the living and the dying of all classes, whether in money, in kind or in effort.

The balance between love for this establishment, contented conformity to it, disgruntled compliance with it and alienated withdrawal from it is, by its nature, hard to establish. It is clear, however, that open dissent was very rare. Since the expulsion of the English Jews in 1291, England had been religiously uniform in law, and not too far from it in fact. A very few foreign Jews apparently did find a home in London at times, remaining virtually invisible.[1] There were a few sceptics, scoffers and freethinkers, often motivated by individual grievances, who – for the Church – were no more than a minor disciplinary irritant. A rather more substantial irritant was the loose movement of dissidents who called each other 'brethren' or 'known men', but who were known to their orthodox neighbours and are still known to historians as the Lollards. This scabrously anti-ceremonial and anti-hierarchical movement was vaguely attached to the memory of the fourteenth-century Oxford theologian John Wyclif, but retained little of his particular doctrines beyond a passionate commitment to the English Bible: the practice of this religion apparently consisted chiefly in clandestine meetings to read the Bible and other sermons or texts aloud. Otherwise, Lollards generally conformed outwardly to the public Church, albeit with some misgivings and with occasional, sometimes startlingly obscene outbursts of scorn at its practices. Periodically some bishops took it upon themselves to try to root out these heretics, whereupon most of those arrested readily recanted their errors and returned home to carry on. Although repeat offenders did face burning alive, the numbers remained low. Lollardy was a low-level, endemic presence in a handful of southern English regions, notably the cities of London, Bristol, Coventry and surrounding rural areas, and in particular the Chiltern hills of Buckinghamshire, the closest thing it had to a heartland. But its chief significance even in

[1] David S. Katz, The Jews in the History of England, 1485-1850 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

those regions was indirect. It primed the English Church and people to be aware of heresy, one simple sign of which is that 'heretic' and 'Lowler' were widely used as all-purpose insults almost devoid of specific meaning.

This was not the most promising terrain for the Protestant Reformation to take root. As everywhere in Europe, certain small but important social groups showed an early interest in the religious novelties coming out of Germany: merchants whose travels exposed them to foreign ways, scholars struck by the appeal of Luther's ideas. That persistent Lollard minority showed some interest too. But that hardly made the new heresies dangerous. As the formidable machinery of the English church and state began to mobilise behind orthodoxy in the late 1520s, it made sense to expect that this movement would at worst become another annoyingly persistent minority, and at best would be squelched altogether.

In the event, however, the state threw its weight on the other side of the balance, and this turned out to be decisive. King Henry VIII's marital and dynastic crisis, and his bloodily quixotic solution to it, merged improbably with the new religious movement to take England into unexplored territory. A ratchet of legislation between 1529 and 1536 successively restricted the privileges of the English clergy, broke the legal threads connecting the English church to Rome, and asserted that the king was supreme head, immediately under Christ, of the Church of England: a sententious title, made more ominous by the regime's refusal to define exactly what it might mean.

The assertion of that title in 1534 is usually taken to be a decisive turning-point, and sometimes counted as the foundation-date of the independent Church of England, but at first relatively few English subjects took much notice. Rumours of the king's marital adventures had been widely circulated, but the first change actually to affect the parishes was some amendments to the liturgy. Hitherto the Pope had been prayed for daily at Mass, both in Latin and in English: now he was not to be mentioned, and scratched out of the service books. In the canon of the Mass, the prayer for pope, bishop and king became (or often became, for there was no uniform policy) a prayer for king and bishop. These were on one level minor tweaks, but, given the conservative familiarity of liturgy, impossible not to notice.[2]

Following close behind was a more momentous imposition: royal commissioners requiring all adult males in England to swear an oath acknowledging the king's new marriage and disavowing his first, on pain of treason. (A second oath, acknowleding the king's newly-discovered supremacy over the Church, was administered much more sparingly, and almost exclusively to clergy.) Virtually no-one resisted. It was not a matter to die for. But the sheer oddity of the policy – subjects were not normally required to consent to a royal marriage – was a sign that England was in uncharted waters. The entire population was being conscripted to, and implicated in, forging a new religio-political identity. Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell doubtless did not see themselves as enfranchising the population, but they were creating, or acknowledging, an unprecedented variety of popular politics.[3]

Other clues began to materialise in the parishes as the months went past. Old taxes ('Peter's Pence') vanished; new, more arduous dues took their place. Preachers (an occasional presence in most parishes) obediently extolled the king's supremacy, and some, more daringly, questioned the value or even the legitimacy of the old ceremonies and sacraments. Royal commissioners nosed into every church, asking questions about money and property, and sparking galloping rumours. Change, and fear, was in the air.

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[2] de Mezerac-Zanetti, ref.

[3] Gray, Oaths.

In 1536 some of the rumours came true, in what was, for most English people, the defining event of the Reformation: the dissolution of the monasteries. No other event of the sixteenth century engraved itself so effectively onto popular memory.[4] For generations to come, the division into 'abbey time' and the emptier years since would remain a reference-point for people with little sense of numbered dates. And no surprise. The seizure of all monastic property by the Crown in 1536-40 was and remains the largest single transfer of landed wealth in English history. It also remains weirdly under-researched. The roots of the policy have been much debated (in short, greed sauced with humanist and evangelical distaste for monks), but its effects remain much less clear. This was partly because 'the dissolution of the monasteries' was a composite event made up of hundreds of local dissolutions, in which institutions whose local significance had varied hugely were destroyed in a range of different ways and were succeeded by a range of different arrangements. A few of the greatest abbeys became secular cathedrals; some became parish churches; more were simply parlayed into private ownership by a crown which burned through this unprecedented windfall so fast that it was facing bankruptcy again before the monasteries were five years dead.

Two effects of this on the wider population stand out. First, the destruction of the monasteries probably damaged England's structures for social welfare more than any other single event has ever done. Most of the hospitals, education, employment and charity that the monasteries had provided simply disappeared. Royal promises to use parasitic monks' wealth to aid the poor turned out to be worthless. In the upland regions of England, where parishes were large and the monasteries' role had been that much more vital, the effect was catastrophic. Recent archaeological research on childhood mortality suggests that it leapt in the years around 1540 and remained high thereafter.[5] And if the dissolution only served to accentuate and underline a set of adverse economic trends that were already underway, it also became a byword for them and the perceived injustices they represented. It is no coincidence that the largest and most dangerous mass rebellion of the age, the northern risings in the autumn of 1536 known collectively (and a little misleadingly) as the Pilgrimage of Grace, was sparked primarily by the Dissolution. As the regime had taught them, the Pilgrims bound themselves to their cause by means of an oath.[6] Only now was England waking up to the fact it was in a new world.

Second, at least once the outmanoeuvred Pilgrims had been suppressed and it was clear that further resistance would be futile, the monasteries' lay neighbours began to be drawn into the process. The greatest winners were the gentry, who ended up holding not only most of the former monastic lands, but also a series of legal rights that went with them. The majority of English advowsons – the legal rights to present priests to rectories, vicarages and other benefices – had belonged to monasteries. Now, bizarrely and almost by accident, these rights and responsibilities were transferred to the new owners of the land; and, even more bizarrely, this arrangement endured and endures even to the present. This looked to many at the time, and since, like a gross scandal, although from the new owners' point of view it naturally seemed a little different. They were often longstanding patrons and benefactors of the religious houses they now owned, and sometimes saw some continuity between these two different forms of social leadership. And many of them continued to see their new duties to

[4] Wood, ref.

[5] Bennjamin J. Penny-Mason and Rebecca L. Gowland, 'The Children of the Reformation: Childhood Palaeoepidemiology in Britain, AD 1000–1700' in *Medieval Archaeology* vol. 58 (2014), 162-194.

[6] Gray.

the parish churches under their care as a solemn charge, to be executed faithfully. It at least justified their sudden enrichment.[7]

But, as it became clear that the monasteries could not be saved, others too rushed to seize what they could for themselves from the communal ruin. Unless the royal commissioners managed to stop it, fabrics and furnishings were spirited away, roofs were stripped of lead, even the building-stones of the abbeys themselves disappeared in the night. In some cases, we know that this was intended as pious salvage, with particular relics, images, vestments or other precious items stored away in hope that the world would one day turn and increasingly-distant normality would return. But more often it seems to have been simply scavenging from the old Church's corpse. What this means is still disputed: were such scanvengers imbruing their hands, too, in the blood, and so making themselves stakeholders in Henry's Reformation? Or were they merely making pragmatic use of objects which the royal commissioners' depredations had already desacralised? We do not know, but whether willingly or not, they were helping to ensure that the old world could not easily be restored.[8]

Along with the monasteries, some other dominant features of England's inherited religious landscape were destroyed in the late 1530s. Pilgrimages were suppressed, with all relics now being classed as idols and England's premier shrine, that of Thomas Becket at Canterbury, being pulverised for memorialising a man now vilified as a traitor. Pardons and indulgences, the small change of the Catholic economy of salvation, were prohibited. Perhaps the most tedious regular obligation imposed on Christian laypeople, the Lenten fast, was relaxed by royal proclamation. The English Bible, long banned because of its association with the Lollards, was not only legalised but, in 1538, ordered to be placed in every parish church so that all comers might read it. Rumours spoke of more to come. Would priests be allowed to marry? Would parish churches be seized like the monasteries had been? Surely the new royal order to make a record of all baptisms, marriages and burials could only portend onerous taxes?

Instead, in the early 1540s, as Henry VIII made it clear his Reformation was not going to go much further, an illusory stability appeared. In many parish churches, not much had changed. The Mass continued in all its traditional glory, albeit a new English-language litany was introduced in 1544. Heretics continued to suffer reassuringly traditional deaths. The many English people who wished to convince themselves that England's religion was basically unchanged could still do so, albeit with some effort. When Henry VIII made an emotional appeal to his Parliament at Christmas 1545 for religious unity, lamenting that his subjects were quarreling about religion and labelling one another heretics and papists by turn, it was possible to hope that the unity of which he spoke might materialise. For whatever else had been shaken, one feature of England's unofficial religion had been powerfully reinforced by the events of the previous decade: the king's own authority. Henry VIII had given his subjects ample reason to doubt his good faith and piety, but not enough to outweigh the deeply entrenched national faith in good lordship, a faith which the regime bolstered with a canny mix of idealistic propaganda, nationalist drum-beating and carefully calibrated acts of exemplary violence.

In fact, the quarrelsome nation which he described was going to become and to remain England's new reality. The most fundamental change wrought by the Reformations which he started was one which neither he nor any of the other leading protagonists wanted: a nation which had been unified in religion became divided by it. The remainder of the story of

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[7] Kaufman art; Ben Lowe, *Commonwealth and the English Reformation: Protestantism and the Politics of Religious Change in the Gloucester Vale, 1483-1560* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010).

[8] Shagan; Duffy contra Shagan.

the Reformations is one of how those divisions were negotiated and how the lives of the men and women who took the different paths now open to them were changed in the process.

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The illusory stability of Henry VIII's last years gave way to a decade and a half of bewildering, switchback religious lurches, a string of crises which made clear how much had in fact already changed.

Much of the chaos of Edward VI's short reign (1547-53) owed little to his regimes' radical religious policies, and much to the strains of a catastrophic war in Scotland and deeper, ongoing shifts of social and economic power towards the gentry. The social significance of religious change in this context was twofold. First, this was the period when religious change became impossible for even the wilfully uninformed to ignore. The Mass was progressively replaced with a series of English liturgies which changed the daily and weekly rituals of church life almost beyond recognition. The Tudor state's insatiable greed for ecclesiastical property reached the parishes in earnest, stripping churches of their imagery, plate and furnishings, and closing the chantries which had maintained thousands of priests in parishes across the country. The religious space thus laid bare was filled, amongst other things, by officially-approved homilies which all parish clergy were required to read aloud to their people, an early modern equivalent of a radio broadcast which ensured that all English subjects were exposed to the new doctrines – if they listened, and if their priest read them in a manner which made it possible for them to do so.

The rage which this provoked in one of England's most traditionally rebellious regions, the south-western peninsula, is well known: in the summer of 1549, much of Devon and Cornwall rose in rebellion against the successive changes in general and the new Book of Common Prayer in particular. What is remarkable, however, is how limited this response was. Very few of those English people whom we know, or suspect, loathed what was being done to their Church did anything about it. Although print censorship all but collapsed in 1547-9, very few religious conservatives had anything published. There was foot-dragging and passive resistance to a point, but precious few seem to have had the stomach for a confrontation. Some had already been bought off, or at least compromised. Most of those who had reconciled themselves to Henry VIII's changes had thereby already gone too far to turn back. Some of what little evidence we have suggests that a lethal fatalism had settled onto English conservatism. Nothing could now be done, except wait for the young king to come of age, hoping and trusting that he would put things right. The truth – that the Tudor kings were the root of the problem, not a part of the solution – was sufficiently unwelcome that most of their subjects' minds shied away from it.[9]

Instead, for many, the combination of social and religious change was read in a second, surprising way. The matter of the 'commonwealth' was a major theme of evangelical preaching: lamenting the growing economic woes of the age, and diagnosing them as moral failings. This rhetoric had started outside the state establishment, with the many evangelicals who felt the waves of seizures of church property to be somewhere between a missed opportunity and mere robbery. With the new reign, some of those same evangelicals had come into the regime but had refused to moderate their views, and some of those at the heart the regime itself had taken a similarly idealistic stance. Whether sincerely or cynically, they

[9] Ryrie, Age of Reformation 162-7.

managed to stake out a decent claim to the moral high ground. As a result, when, in the desperate summer of 1549, there was unrest driven by enclosure and other socio-economic grievances across most of southern and midland England, many of the 'campers' who assembled to press their demands aligned themselves with, not against, reforming religion. They borrowed its language to appeal to the regime, and they heard its preachers at their encampments. Again, how sincere any of this was is beyond our knowing, but it is the first tangible sign of what would come. The English, or many of them, would find a way of building a new identity around this religion and of making it work for them.[10]

First, there would be a new set of crises and a tantalising alternative. For all the emerging enthusiasm for the new religion and the helpless confusion of the old, there is little doubt that the restoration of Catholicism under Mary I (1553-8) was both popular and on course to succeed. A huge and genuinely impressive effort to rebuild the material fabric of parish Catholicism achieved an extraordinary amount in a short time, especially given that these were years of dearth, war and epidemics. But the clock could not simply be turned back. There had been too much looting and destruction, and the new owners of the monastic lands would only consent to the Catholic restoration once their right to keep their ill-gotten gains had been protected. For that and other reasons, English Catholicism was not so much restored as re-created in this reign, with the new spiritualities and disciplines of what would become the Counter-Reformation beginning to make themselves felt.[11]

The sudden end of the restoration and the return to Protestantism, with the death of Mary and the accession of Elizabeth I in 1558, cut this process short. Aside from the tantalising might-have-beens, the Marian interlude had lasting consequences. Any prospect of a new, Protestant religious unity was now gone. The religious conservatives who had been left voiceless and bewildered by Edward VI's Reformation had now rediscovered their steel. Those who had once been lured into abandoning the Papacy by intertia and loyalty to the Tudor crown would not make the same mistake again. A small but self-confident minority of determined Roman Catholics now remained in England, and for all that subsequent centuries of persecution, discrimination and prejudice could throw at them, they would persist. Around them and to some extent sustaining them was a larger periphery of sympathisers whose outward confirmity to the established Protestant church was half-hearted or, indeed, wholly cynical.

A similar splintering was emerging at the other end of the spectrum. The Marian regime had tried to deal with England's stubborn minority of earnest Protestant converts by intimidating its leaders into recantation or driving them into exile. Both policies only half-worked. Some prominent Protestants did recant, but many more stuck to their guns: for them, too, the battle-lines now seemed far clearer than before. The regime was eventually compelled to follow through on its threats, and between 1555-56 a swathe of imprisoned bishops, clerics and theologians were executed. Those who had escaped to exile, meanwhile, organised an impressive campaign of printed propaganda which the regime struggled to control; they also, in the pressure-cooker of exile and exposed to the heat of Protestant Reformations more full-blooded than England's, were fired with new zeal. All this ensured that the purge did not end with the leaders. From 1556-58 the regime was rounding up and burning underground congregations of clandestine Protestants from London, Kent, Essex and elsewhere. Some three hundred died in all.

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[10] Ethan Shagan, 'Protector Somerset and the 1549 rebellions: new sources and new perspectives' in The English Historical Review vol. 114 (1999); Wood.

[11] Duffy, Fires of Faith.

Given a few more years, these policies might well have stamped out English Protestantism, but in the event they only angered it. The memory of the persecutors' cruelty and of the martyrs' heroism was cherished and burnished. More than merely a byword, it became the keystone of an emergent national myth of Catholic cruelty. As an ever-loyal nation swung behind the lead of its new queen, it learned that murdering good English men and women was what Catholics did, a lesson which it was slow to forget. It has been said that although England became a Protestant nation under Elizabeth I, it did not then, or indeed ever, truly become a nation of Protestants. It did, however, become and remain – far beyond the period covered by this volume – a nation which knew it hated and feared Catholics.

Not that this made even that anti-Catholic majority united. If the Marian regime did not succeed in exterminating the Protestants which it exiled and persecuted, it did succeed in splitting them. The exiles, forced to forge their own path, split bitterly between those who believed it best to remain in lockstep with each other and with the orderly Reformation of Edward VI, and those who wished to dash to a more complete renewal of their religious lives without waiting for the laggards to catch up. In 1558-9 they brought this unresolved quarrel home with them, where it became overlaid on another: what was to be done about those who had conformed to Mary's restoration, but who now claimed to be good Protestants? Surely those who had faced death or exile for their faithful witness could not simply keep company with such fainthearted turncoats as if nothing had happened? Did they not need to repent of their complicity, and demonstrate their good earnest by pressing the Reformation forward?[12] Hence the split between the new would-be centrist establishment Protestants, 'moderate' in the sense that they were as keen to bridle enthusiasm as to spur on laggards; and those who quickly came to be labelled 'Puritans', whose determination to purge the English Church of its popish remnants was a sign that they did not truly believe that the establishment's religion was sincere or reformed at all. The battle-lines thus formed would divide English religion for generations to come.

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The quarter-century of turmoil from 1534-59 was followed by eighty years of formal religious stability, which only broke down with the political crisis of 1640 and the subsequent Civil Wars. The social history of the Reformations during this long period of supposed peace is, therefore a matter of how the religious divisions thrown up by the preceding era worked their way through English society at large, and what effect they had on the way.

It has been traditional to see the great drama of this period as the struggle between Puritans and an establishment Protestantism which has sometimes, anachronistically, been labelled Anglicanism. This is a myth which has suited partisans who claim their descent from both parties, and like most myths it has some truth to it. From the 1560s onwards, and with increasing urgency through the 1570s and 1580s, a broad party of self-consciously 'advanced' Protestants pressed for Elizabeth's Reformation to be purged of its remaining popish structures and rituals, only to be stymied at every turn. The regime – above all the queen herself – refused to yield an inch to opponents who, if they could, would plainly have taken a mile. Petitions and policy proposals were stonewalled. Attempts to build a Puritan church from the ground up in regions like East Anglia, by bringing groups of like-minded ministers together to support one another and (informally) to build the kind of structures of collective self-governance typical of Calvinism, were blocked and at times fiercely

[12] Harkins art.

suppressed. In 1588, Puritan impatience boiled over with a published set of viciously satirical, populist attacks on the corruption and hypocrisy of the bishops, under the pen-name Martin Marprelate. This provoked a determined counter-attack in which Puritanism was effectively stamped out as a public presence within the Elizabethan church. It remained, however, as a stubborn and vocal minority of malcontents through the 1590s and the reign of James I (1603-25), who contained it but turned a blind eye to it. However, his son, Charles I, pushed for a more thoroughly Anglican discipline, enforcing this policy with more zeal than discretion. This, and secular discontent with his (mis)rule, stirred up a hornet's nest of opposition in both England and Scotland which eventually brought England's unprecedently long civil peace to an end.

The difficulty with this narrative is that no such clearly defined parties as Puritans existed. It is true that many who clearly had puritan tendencies liked to think of themselves as a small, persecuted minority at odds with the mass of the godless around them, but it is also clear that this was a theological rather than a sociological opinion. These were people who were doctrinally conditioned to see themselves as a faithful remnant, a small portion of God's elect amongst a reprobate mass, and we should not mistake rhetorical claims that scarce one person in a hundred was saved for sober attempts to provide accurate statistics.[13] In fact, the evidence increasingly suggests that some puritan characteristics spread themselves very widely in English society, at least by the end of the sixteenth century. 'Anglican', by contrast, is an anachronistic category which virtually all historians of the pre-Civil War period now take care to avoid. How we should think about the obedient, conformist Protestantism that became England's default is not so clear.

The traditional category of 'puritan' can only be used to define the earnest, Calvinistic Protestantism which became firmly rooted in England by the late sixteenth century if we broaden its meaning considerably.[14] For at the same time as puritan agitators were banging their heads against the brick wall of royal intransigence, others were quietly cultivating their own godly gardens. Richard Greenham, vicar of the tiny Cambridgeshire hamlet of Dry Drayton from 1570 onwards, was a puritan of another kind. The further Reformation he had in mind was not institutional but pastoral and spiritual: changing ordinary Christians' lives through the work of painstaking parish ministry. A stream of idealistic students from Cambridge came to live and work alongside Greenham for a few months at a time, gaining informal apprenticeships in godly pastoring. And while he became one of the best-known of those who were working to build a truly Protestant England from within the established Church, he was not alone. A generation of earnest, idealistic but clear-sighted ministers who grew up with him also put their shoulders to the wheel. The project was that England's Reformation would be completed retail, soul by soul, rather than wholesale through changes to its laws. If Greenham was the morning-star of this quiet second Reformation, its brightest ornament was William Perkins, a Cambridge theologian who, at his premature death in 1602, left a small library of terse, humane guides to Christian living which were translated across Protestant Europe, and a cohort of enthusiastic students and successors who turned his message into Jacobean England's public orthodoxy.

The most recent studies of both Greenham and Perkins have both denied that their subjects were Puritans at all, on the grounds that they largely conformed to and were undoubtedly loyal to the established Church of England.[15] Whatever labels we choose to apply to them, it is certainly clear that the kind of religion they tried to inculcate seeped deep

[13] Collinson, Religion of Protestants ref.
[14] A process ongoing ever since Lake, Moderate Puritans.
[15] Carlson & Parker; Patterson.

into English life. And if idealistic ministers always saw the glass of popular religion as half-empty, historians do not need to agree with them. Booksellers, at least, knew their were fortunes to be made selling anthologies of prayers, handbooks to pious living, and even printed sermons which inculcated a Calvinistic 'practical divinity' of Greenham and Perkins' kind. Bishop Lewis Bayly's *The Practise of pietie, Directing a Christian how to walke that he may please God* consists of over 800 pages of stodgy but earnestly practical advice on Christian living. Between its first publication in 1612 and the Civil War it ran through over fifty editions, some of them printed in cramped type on tiny pages so as to keep the price as low as possible.[16] Other popular imprints which failed to reach Bayly's sheer volume of sales made up the difference in variety and accessibility: moralising ballads imbued with Protestant principles, stirring tales of the Protestant martyrs, collections of prayers which used Protestant doctrines as their framework, advice on household management which presumed a self-consciously Protestant piety. If the Protestantism on display was sometimes a little rough and ready, its assumptions and patterns of thought also pervaded these texts. Insofar as we can reconstruct lists of best- and steady-selling religious imprints, such unabashedly Protestant texts dominate them.[17]

Other evidence points in the same direction. The sermon, advanced Protestantism's chosen medium of religious change: recent scholarship has made clear how widespread, carefully constructed and rhetorically effective post-Reformation preaching became, and also how it came to be valued by parish communities which saw learned preaching as a point of local prestige.[18] Music: Protestant scepticism drove traditional polyphonic church music to a few traditionalist redoubts (mostly cathedrals and collegiate churches), but in its place introduced a new phenomenon, singing of metrical psalms in 'Geneva style' (that is, men and women in unison). As its traditionalist opponents worried, this turned out not only to be hugely popular but to be a Trojan horse for sometimes aggressively Protestant presumptions.[19] The household: against a long-standing presumption that English Protestantism's rejection of religious imagery in worship extended to a general suspicion of all visual images, we now know how Biblical and other explicitly Protestant visual imagery pervaded the decoration both of private homes and of public spaces such as inns.[20] Religious practice itself: what we know about the patterns of public, family and solitary prayer amongst post-Reformation Protestants belies any sharp division between Puritan and conformist Protestants. 'Conformists' fasted, wept for their sins, and pursued fervour and zeal in their religious exercises. 'Puritans' embraced such traditional-seeming practices as making pious vows; used set forms of prayer, including the Book of Common Prayer, in their private devotions; and found spiritual comfort in the ministry of the established Church.[21] Undoubtedly some English Protestants could be described either as puritans or as anti-puritans, some of the time at least. But rather than attempting to divide the nation into these parties, we would do better to heed the words of one of the period's foremost historians: 'zealous Protestantism could . . . be a popular religion'.[22]

Was there a way of being a zealous Protestant which did *not* tend towards puritanism? Clearly, yes – a small avant-garde of ceremonialist clerics and traditionalist laypeople were exploring this throughout the period, and with new gusto and royal encouragement from the

[16] Green, Print and Protestantism 348-51.
[17] Watt, Cheap print; Walsham, Providence.
[18] Hunt, Art of Hearing
[19] Ryrie, Psalms
[20] Hamling, Decorating the godly household.
[21] Ryrie, Being Protestant.
[22] Walsham, Providence 325.

1620s onwards. Some such people were, as their opponents alleged, undoubtedly flirting either deliberately or unawares with Catholicism, whose rich spirituality continued to have an appeal and which both won and lost converts throughout this period.[23] But generally, this was a libel. There is a case for arguing that the new English church built up a level of genuine mass allegiance from people who were not drawn by the Calvinist doctrines which had become their preachers' orthodoxies. If this is so, loyalty to the new English liturgy, the Book of Common Prayer which puritan campaigners wanted so badly to reform, was at its heart. If England cannot be divided into Puritans and conformists, it can perhaps be divided into Bible Protestants and Prayer Book Protestants. Certainly, when the Church of England was dismantled by the wartime Parliament in the 1640s, its defenders found that the Prayer Book was their most popular cause, and although the use of the book was formally illegal throughout the later 1640s and 1650s, it continued to be very widespread.[24]

What this religion meant to its adherents remains the great mystery. Conformity, by its nature, does not leave much mark on the record, and a religion which is almost defined by praying in set words tends not to speak for itself. We may see a glimpse of it from outside in a jaundiced but sharply-observed portrait painted by a popular puritan author, Arthur Dent, in his bestselling 1601 book *The plaine mans path-way to heauen*.[25] Like others before him who had tried to describe the so-called 'country divinity', the religion of the uneducated layman in Protestant England, Dent was acerbic on the subject. His book consists of a lengthy dialogue between three idealised types: a Protestant minister in the Greenham-Perkins mould (backed up by a zealous layman), an 'ignorant man' of goodwill but of corrupt religion, and a 'caviller' or malicious fault-finder. After nearly four hunded pages of conversation, the ignorant man is converted and the caviller departs, sour and, to Dent, evidently Hell-bound.

The ignorant man, however, initially jibs at the religion his more self-consciously pious neighbours recommend:

> If a man say his Lords praier, his Ten Commandements, and his Beliefe, and keepe them ... no doubt he shall be saued, without all this running to Sermons, and pratling of the Scripture. ... As long as I serue God, and say my praiers duly, and truely, morning and euening, and haue a good faith in God, and put my whole trust in him, and doe my true intent, and haue a good minde to God-ward, and a good meaning; although I am not learned, yet I hope it will serue the turne for my soules health.

Working men who lack the leisure or inclination to bury themselves in the Bible 'cannot liue by the scriptures: they are not for plaine folke, they are too high for vs'. In any case, he adds almost in passing, he cannot read.[26] Two decades earlier another zealous pastor, George Gifford, had painted a similar portrait of what he called 'the Countrie diuinitie'. Gifford's plain man liked a modicum of preaching – especially if the preacher could quote learned doctors in Latin – but believed that the Prayer Book service and the official Homilies were 'as good edifying' as any sermon. And he disliked moralising busybodies who believed Christians should 'sitte mooping alwayes at their bookes'.[27]

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[23] Questier, conversion.
[24] Maltby.
[25] An argument made in Haigh, Pathways.
[26] Arthur Dent, *The plaine mans path-way to heauen* (RSTC 6629. London: Melchiside Bradwood for Edward Bishop, 1607), 25-8.
[27] George Gifford, *A briefe discourse of certaine pointes of the religion, which is among the common sorte of Christians: which may bee termed the Countrie diuinitie* (RSTC 11845. London: T. Dawson for T. Cooke, 1581), fos 2r, 3r, 18v-19r, 24v, 50r-v, 65v.

'This age,' Dent's minister commented, 'is full of such carnall Protestants', and although we might prefer the designation Prayer Book Protestants, we might well agree.[28] We might also wonder what else the religion of the illiterate could have been. Again, however, we should beware of the Calvinistic inclination to separate sheep from goats. The claim that the world was divided sharply between the godly and the ignorant was preachers' rhetoric, not sociological analysis. And whereas in 1581 Gifford's country-divine rejected his godly neighbour's entreaties, in 1601 Dent's ignorant man decided to embrace the learning he was offered. Along with the continued affection that many undoubtedly zealous Bible-Protestants continued to feel for the Prayer Book, this is a sign that, if we must draw lines here, we should not do so too sharply. Zealous Protestantism, of the kind that was often labelled puritan, was a diverse and expansive – not to say quarrelsome – category. By the turn of the century, it had become the most readily available model of what Christian piety meant for most English people. Ministers wanted their people to define their entire lives by it, and so naturally were disappointed. But its reach into national religious life was far more pervasive.

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What of those whom we cannot place on this establishment Protestant-puritan continuum? For at least three main groups of English people lay beyond it.

The most obvious were the Catholics – whether 'church papists', who conformed to the law to various degrees,[29] or open recusants, who refused to conform to the established Church and faced a series of consequences ranging from fines, discrimination and civil disabilities to, in extremis, exile or execution. England was openly at war with Spain from 1585-1604, and unofficially so for a decade or more before, and during this period Catholics were easily seen as foreign agents: the bulk of the killings, both of missionary priests and of their lay protectors, fell during those years. The Gunpowder Plot of 1605 ensured that peace did not bring an outbreak of tolerance. The struggle for England's Catholic community was not merely to negotiate these very real practical dangers, but to forge a sense of what its own identity might be. Its exiled leaders, training and sending back the missionary priests into terrible danger, were naturally inclined to confrontation, openly denying the legitimacy especially of Elizabeth I's regime and pressing for Catholics to rebel. In 1569, some of them in England's North-East had done so, supporting two earls who proposed to replace the queen with her Catholic cousin Mary, queen of Scots. The revolt was a fiasco which crumbled at the first show of strength from the regime, and which was followed by a deliberately bloody programme of exemplary reprisals.

After that, rebellion was a dream, dependent on various imagined *ex machina* interventions which never appeared. And so for most of those Catholics who remained in England, the exiles' purism seemed self-defeating. A highly visible slice of England's high nobility remained stubbornly but discreetly Catholic. They and their affinities pioneered what would eventually become the mainstream view of English Catholics, that is, they insisted on their political loyalty to the English throne and state and argued that it was compatible with their spiritual allegiance to Rome. In the wake of the Gunpowder Plot, James I attempted to exploit this by imposing a new oath of allegiance on Catholics, which disavowed any belief that popes may depose or excommunicate kings. Theologically it was almost impossible for Catholics to accept this. The oath was therefore in one sense a success, in that it made the

[28] Dent, Plain man's pathway 125.
[29] Walsham, Church papists.

Catholic clergy look extreme while expressing the view which many lay Catholics already held. However, as the sense of immediate danger receded in the 1610s and 1620s, and especially once Charles I's marriage to a Catholic princess had established a public Catholic household in the heart of London, the project of splitting, isolating and exposing English Catholicism no longer seemed so urgent. A new reality was becoming clear: English Catholicism had stabilised. It was not going to surge back to retake the country, despite puritan scaremongering to that effect. Nor was it going to die out. In some families and some regions – notably the North-West – it was deeply entrenched. And as is often the case with stable religious minorities, once a generation or two of both fears and hopes have turned out to be groundless, both sides of the divide began to relax and adapt themselves to a new normal.

No such relaxation was apparent with regards to a smaller but more threatening minority: Protestant radicals and separatists. Since the reign of Henry VIII England had been subject to periodic panics about 'Anabaptists', who would supposedly tear up all godly society and sound doctrine to replace it with profanity, polygamy, equality, common ownership of goods, rebellion and slaughter. The bloody disaster of the apocalyptic Anabaptist kingdom established in the German city of Münster in 1534-5 remained a staple of alarmist English preaching into the mid-seventeenth century and beyond. In fact, at least for the first century of the Reformation, this remained a largely imaginary threat. A handful of supposed Anabaptists, many of them foreigners, were burned as heretics by successive regimes: the last two died in 1612. There was also a considerable panic in the early 1580s about a secretive, mystical sect of Dutch origins, the Family of Love, which had certainly built up networks of sympathisers in Cambridgeshire and elsewhere, but which panic and paranoia began to spot everywhere.[30] The significance of these episodes is not the presence of tiny numbers of sectarians, but the fear which they generated in the rest of society. With hindsight we can see that this fear was excessive, but the far boundary of the Calvinist settlement was less clearly defined than it can look in retrospect. The possibility of the Reformation leaking into a welter of chaotic radicalism was real, and indeed, in the mid-seventeenth century, it would happen. The sixteenth century's panicky overreactions may have averted a genuine threat.

That is not to say, however, that the far boundary of the Reformation remained secure. Nor is it simply that Protestantism's discursive and quarrelsome nature threw up some highly idiosyncratic individuals as a matter of course.[31] Predictably enough, the repeated puritan disappointments of the 1570s and 1580s drove a handful of radicals to abandon hopes for a comprehensive national Reformation and instead to press ahead on their own. These separatists, often named Brownists for one of their most prominent early leaders, also remained small in number, and – given the hostile legal environment – tended to slip into exile in the Netherlands and elsewhere. It was such a group of separatist exiles in the Netherlands who took the lead in establishing the colony in Massachusetts in 1620: tellingly, they preferred the appalling hardships and risks of a transatlantic crossing to a brutally hostile environment to the danger that they might 'lose our language and our name, of English'.[32]

The New England experiment made plain, however, that these formal separatists were the tip of a much larger iceberg. The phenomenon of what Patrick Collinson has called 'semi-

[30] Marsh; Christopher Carter, 'The Family of Love and its Enemies' in Sixteenth Century Journal vol. 37 (2006), 651-72.

[31] See for example, Shagan on Clement Armstrong; Lake, Boxmaker's revenge.

[32] Keith L. Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism: A History of the English and Scottish Churches of the Netherlands in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 139.

separatism' was pervasive in puritan circles by the end of Elizabeth's reign: a kind of puritan echo of the church papists, conforming to the established religion but with a whole series of voluntary structures, meetings and disciplines alongside it. In many cases these self-imposed structures, rather than the officially approved ordinances, became the heart of such people's religion.[33] They tended to maintain that this was compatible with being loyal members of the Church of England, and, indeed, that they were truer to its proclaimed principles than most others. The hierarchy, and many of such people's neighbours, found an excess of enthusiasm no more welcome than open foot-dragging. Which view was correct is a matter of opinion, and partly depends on how the denouement is interpreted. As the definition of conformity was narrowed and its enforcement was stepped up in the late 1620s and 1630s, the dilemmas of the semi-separatists became sharp. Possibly as many as 20,000 emigrated to New England in that period, choosing danger and hardship as the only way of remaining faithful both to their consciences and their king.[34] Many of those who remained at home felt the tug of open opposition. Small conventicles of Baptists, antinomians and other radical groups began to emerge in London and elsewhere in the 1630s.[35] And when the established Church's discipline collapsed after 1640s, a welter of Independent and then other, more radical groups emerged into the open. Did this prove that the establishment was right to use a degree of repression to keep order? Or did it show that, in the end, the repression of the Laudian Church was counter-productive?

One question which remains unsolved is how, and whether, the repeated panics about separatism and radicalism connect with another, rather bloodier set of panics about dangerous religious dissidence. England's involvement with the great witch-hunt of the early modern period was marginal. As was the case in many larger, more law-governed states, bureaucratic procedures tended to prevent local rumours and temporary panics translating into large-scale purges. Our records of witch-prosecutions are poor, and give us systematic coverage only of the Home Counties. Some fifty convicted witches were hanged in Essex, with cases peaking in the 1580s, and with four times as many acquittals as convictions. The numbers are much smaller but the pattern similar in other counties. Perhaps a few hundred died across the country as a whole, overwhelmingly women. For the most part, this seems primarily to reflect long-established patterns of popular belief in malign magic. The novelty, both in England and elsewhere, was that suspected witches were now being put on trial, with new laws passed to criminalise various magical acts in 1542, 1563 and 1604. For some theologians – Catholic and Protestant alike – this piecemeal approach, focusing on witches who had used magic to inflict tangible harm, was profoundly mistaken: witches' fundamental crime was devil-worship, and they should be hunted down as heretics rather than being dealt with as common felons.[36] As recent scholarship the on far bloodier witch-hunts in central Europe has suggested, this view arose from the experience of hunting down and rooting out Anabaptist and other radical groups, who, like witches, were seen as having been in league with the devil.[37] Whether this view had an impact in the English setting is a question that has, as yet, scarcely been asked. One intriguing straw in the wind is that England made the most robustly sceptical contribution to the continent-wide debate over witchcraft in this era: Reginald Scot's *Discouerie of Witchcraft* (1584) argued bluntly that witchcraft was a fiction, conjured into being by credulous fears and, implicitly, popish superstition. The book was roundly

[33] Collinson, Religion of Protestants 242-283; Collinson, conventicles art.
[34] Hardman Moore, Pilgrims.
[35] Como, Blown by the Spirit.
[36] Sharpe, Instruments of darkness
[37] Waite

condemned on all sides. Intriguingly, Scot has been linked – suggestively, not decisively – to the Family of Love.

As Scot argued, the paranoid suspicions which led some English people to see witches under every bed were no better-founded than the parallel fear of English Anabaptists. The same is not necessarily true of the third and last category of religious dissenters, who were the focus of equally vivid fears: atheists. The English word 'atheist' was coined in 1561, and entered common parlance so quickly that it was clearly filling a need. Anti-atheist polemic became a distinct genre by the early seventeenth century. Whether the phenomenon it was attacking existed in any sense is less clear. A handful of outspoken freethinkers, or blasphemers, can be assembled, but there is no real hint of consistent or serious atheism, or even deism, in England before the mid-seventeenth century. There were certainly believers – often the most earnest and serious believers – who found themselves tempted to doubt such core Christian doctrines as the inspiration of Scripture, the immortality of the soul and the incarnation of Christ, although naturally we only tend to hear of such private struggles with doubt once the doubters had resolved them in favour of orthodoxy.[38] The most widespread form of 'atheism', however, was what William Perkins called 'the common Atheisme that is in the world', meaning those who lived 'as if there were no God'.[39] Such people might not only openly profess orthodox Christianity, they might actually believe themselves to be believers. Yet their actions, as a string of clerics warned, told another story.

Much of this is simple moralising, but it should be taken seriously at least to this extent. Arthur Dent's characterisation was right: if some of England's carnal Protestants were like his 'ignorant man', that is, at least willing to be pious according to their own lights, others clearly were like his 'caviller', whose main interest in religion was that it leave them alone. So it perhaps always was and will be, but in post-Reformation England the social environment was unprecedently friendly towards 'cavillers'. The formal requirements which the English Church laid on its people were minimal, certainly by comparison both to the medieval past and to the confessional Protestant states forming elsewhere in Europe. The English no longer had to fast (for even the remaining Lenten laws were widely flouted), nor was there social pressure to support the Church with substantial gifts of money, goods and time as once there had been. There was no arduous disciplinary structure imposed. All that was needed was occasional physical presence at church, which need not involve ever attending a sermon. An unprecedented space for mere withdrawal from religious life had opened up. The ferocious religious quarrels of the age did not necessarily convince all observers that one party was right and the others wrong. If there was no open and avowed 'atheism', the authors of diatribes were perhaps right that a creeping secularisation and irreligion was beginning to pervade England's spiritual life. And perhaps that is the way such change always comes: as a social reality before, a generation or two later, the theorists arrive to catch up with and to justify what has already begun to unfold. If so, then in this sense, too, the English Reformations were not a matter of replacing Catholic England with Protestant England, but of ensuring that the English would never again be a nation united under the same God.

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[38] Ryrie, art; Dixon, art.

[39] William Perkins, *A godly and learned exposition of Christs Sermon in the Mount* (Cambridge, 1608), p. 233; John Dod and Robert Cleaver, *Ten sermons tending chiefely to the fitting of men for the worthy receiuing of the Lords Supper* (London, 1611), p. 3.